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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (GARBLED TEXT)

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SUBJECT: BERISHA VS. RAMA: NO END IN SIGHT

Classified By: BY CDA DEBORAH A. JONES, REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After three weeks of increasingly sharp rhetoric and provocative actions, neither Prime Minister Berisha nor opposition Socialist Party (SP) Chairman Edi Rama appear willing to enter into dialogue with one another or to extend any kind of olive branch in an effort to end the current political impasse. On the contrary, both sides appear to believe that they are winning, and see concessions or dialogue as unnecessary or signs of weakness. In the past week, rhetoric and threatened actions have only intensified, with the GOA increasing pressure on prominent businessmen closely tied to Rama and threatening impeachment proceedings against him, and Rama threatening to continue demonstrations into to 2010 "leading to Berisha's removal from office." It is still unclear at this point whether either Rama or Berisha have a real strategy going forward, or whether both are simply improvising tactics as they go along with no clear goal in mind. Although the political stalemate appears likely to continue for the foreseeable future, most observers discount the possibility of political violence or civil unrest. END SUMMARY.

Both Sides Upping the Ante. . .

¶2. (C) Almost immediately following the SP's November 20 demonstration, at which the SP first began calling for early elections, PM Berisha ordered his Democratic Party to sharpen political rhetoric at all levels in its verbal attacks on the SP (led by the PM himself, who in a fiery speech in Parliament named numerous SP MPs and SP-linked businessmen as members of a "builders mafia"). At the same time, the GOA has put pressure on many of Rama's major financial backers through stricter enforcement of tax and building codes, including the partial demolition by construction authorities of a building owned by the brother of an SP MP. (NOTE: The GOA claims that the structure was built illegally. END NOTE). On December 8, the GOA staged a large rally, ostensibly to mark the 19th anniversary of the founding of the student movement that eventually toppled the communist government in 1991. However, DP MPs told PolOff that the primary goal of the rally was to "show GOA resolve" in the face of SP protests and calls for early elections and prove to the SP that the DP/GOA could itself stage large rallies in Tirana.

¶3. (C) For its part, the SP has also upped the ante in recent weeks, largely dropping previous calls for opening contested ballot boxes from the parliamentary elections and instead calling for early elections and vowing to topple the Berisha government via these early elections. The new SP

motto in recent weeks has become "Open the Boxes or Leave!" The SP has also sharpened its rhetoric against PM Berisha in recent weeks, engaging in a tit-for-tat exchange of petty insults and charges of corruption with the DP. On December 14, Rama told an SP rally in Durres that SP protests will continue into 2010, leading to "Berisha's removal from office" (presumably via early elections). The SP boycott of parliament, now in its fourth month, shows no sign of ending soon, with observers from all sides telling PolOff that the boycott could easily last for many more months, if not until the 2011 local elections. During a December 9 meeting with Ambassador Withers, Rama expressed the view that the SP's boycott and protest strategy was becoming increasingly effective in putting pressure on the PM.

14. (C) During a December 16 meeting with PolOff, Erion Veliaj (head of the SP allied G-99 party and very close to Rama) told PolOff that GOA efforts to pressure Rama's financial backers are taking a toll, claiming that Rama's finances were drying up as SP-linked businesses pull back support. However, Veliaj added, Berisha's attacks had also convinced Rama that the boycott and protest strategy was gaining traction, with Rama believing that Berisha's steadfast refusal to open the ballot boxes means Berisha has something to hide. Veliaj said that even if Berisha were to make real concessions at this point, Rama would likely press ahead with demonstrations and stronger calls for early elections in the belief that "the SP has no other option."

. . .But to What End?

15. (C) What Rama actually hopes to achieve from his "boycott and protest" strategy remains unclear. Rama and his supporters continue to claim (as they have from the beginning) that the boycott and demonstrations will continue until the GOA agrees to numerous demands, including opening contested ballot boxes from the parliamentary elections in order to fully investigate alleged electoral fraud. The GOA, for its part, says it will meet any and all SP demands except the opening of ballot boxes, claiming that to do so is illegal (a view ODIHR informally agrees with). (COMMENT: The SP claims of fighting for "transparency" are almost certainly disingenuous. Numerous sources have told PolOff that opening the boxes would likely prove nothing, but would in fact expose many minor irregularities such as missing voter signatures from some voter lists that while having no effect on the election outcome, would serve to cast doubt on the election results and back up SP claims that the parliament elected in June is "illegitimate". The sad fact is that much if not most electoral fraud committed during the parliamentary elections was done via SP-DP collusion at the expense of the smaller parties. Observers from all sides, including the SP, have told PolOff that the SP cannot expose serious DP electoral fraud without also implicating itself, and that the call to open the ballot boxes is little more than a red herring. END COMMENT).

16. (C) Former Foreign Minister and SP MP Kastriot Islami (a critic of Rama's) told PolOff that Rama has two goals: to try and take power via early elections; and/or find a way of strengthening his position as he approaches what is certain to be a tough re-election campaign for Mayor of Tirana in 2011. DP MP Ilir Rusmajli agreed in part with Islami's assessment, saying that calls for early elections are mainly red meat to fire up the SP base and that Rama has no reasonable expectation of ever actually getting to early elections. Rusmajli claimed Rama's main goal is to obstruct the work of the parliament and create a crisis atmosphere in order to damage DP election prospects in 2011. Islami lamented to PolOff on December 15 that no matter Rama's real goals - whether early elections or a stronger position for 2011 or both - no one, be they the international community or PM Berisha, can or will deliver on them, meaning Rama will either push harder and risk a more dangerous political crisis to achieve them, or face an embarrassing defeat.

17. (C) It is also unclear what Berisha's goals and strategy are at this point. Numerous sources have told PolOff that since the November 20 SP rally, Berisha appears to be fueled by little more than rage at the SP and Rama over calls for early elections and Rama's refusal to end the boycott.

(NOTE: Berisha's reaction is all the more curious in that for nearly three months, the PM largely avoided provocative language or actions in response to the SP boycott, with the GOA mainly sticking to legalistic arguments as to why ballot boxes cannot be opened, and avoiding the personal attacks that have figured prominently in DP rhetoric in recent weeks.

Nevertheless, Berisha is well-practiced in the art of slash and burn politics, and all too often his default response to pressure is to try and destroy his opponent. END NOTE) DP MPs told PolOff that many in the DP believe the DP's relatively low-key initial reaction to the boycott only encouraged the SP to become more aggressive in its demands. Islami speculated that Berisha perhaps hopes to cut off Rama's bases of support by going after SP-linked oligarchs and wealthy SP MPs in an effort to weaken Rama. Rusmajli essentially confirmed this view, telling PolOff that Berisha sees the SP today not as the SP of old, but as a party dominated by builders and other businessmen that control Edi Rama. Rusmajli speculated that Berisha was going after these businesspeople "because they dominate Edi Rama."

Internationals To the Rescue?

18. (C) During a December 11 dinner with PolOff and an OSCE rep, two SP MPs close to Rama insisted repeatedly that the SP and DP cannot resolve this stalemate on their own and that intervention by the internationals was the only solution. When asked what the SP hoped to achieve by internationalizing the dispute, neither MP could answer. In a separate meeting with PolOff, Kastriot Islami agreed, saying that Rama and some around him have deluded themselves into believing that international intervention could somehow lead to early elections or other major concessions to the SP by Berisha. Islami claimed any hint of impending intervention will only cause Rama to become even more intransigent, as Rama would see this as legitimizing his "obstruct and boycott" campaign.

Little Fear of Violence, but Political Stalemate Continues

19. (C) Observers on all sides dismissed fears of widespread civil disorder or violence resulting from the political standoff. Both Rusmajli and Islami told PolOff that Rama's ability to cause instability is limited in that SP actions and protests are not gaining any following outside of the SP base. Both agreed, however, that continued demonstrations and the boycott could cause an ongoing political crisis and stalemate. In recent weeks the SP appears to have backed off of plans to order SP-led municipalities to shut down services to the public out of fear of public backlash or possible criminal prosecution. And so far, none of the oft-rumored "provocations" by the SP in hopes of prompting an overreaction by the GOA or police have come to pass. Nevertheless, with neither side willing to ratchet back rhetoric, and SP demonstrations taking place nearly daily, it would only take one incident to potentially touch off a physical confrontation between the two parties.

COMMENT: Albania's Two-Man Political System

110. (C) The current standoff is an unfortunate but predictable result of the Electoral Code passed nearly one year ago, which effectively sidelined nearly all of Albania's smaller political parties and created a de facto two party system. But because Rama and Berisha so dominate their respective parties, Albania has become in effect less a two-party than a two-man political system, with the entire structure held hostage by the whims and emotions of Sali Berisha and Edi Rama.

¶11. (C) COMMENT CONT'D: At this point, neither side appears willing either to ratchet back tensions or make the first effort towards real dialogue. Although it is unclear whether either Berisha or Rama have any real long-term strategy, both appear to believe that they are winning and thus see no need for concessions or dialogue. It is possible that after a few more weeks of flailing away at each other, both Rama and Berisha will get winded and become more open to finding a resolution, although the opposite case - that tensions will continue to go only higher with both sides escalating the dispute - is probably just as likely, at least in the short to mid term. In a recent development, Foreign Minister and leader of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) Ilir Meta said publicly on December 17 that a meeting between Berisha and Rama would be "positive." We do know that Meta has disagreed privately with the current trajectory of the political dialogue. We should be under no illusions that the dispute will burn itself out anytime soon. Bare knuckles politics is the Albanian norm, and both sides appear, at least for now, to have painted themselves into respective corners via their rash actions and harsh rhetoric.

JONES